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Inside This Issue:

- **Bush, Kerry Court Religious Voters** page 1
- **Religion and the 2004 Presidential Elections:** An Interview with Professor Clyde Wilcox..... page 1
- **Campaign Highlight:** Backgrounder: Separation of Church and State in the U.S. page 5

FAST FACTS:

- ✓ **64 percent of** registered voters say that their personal religious beliefs and faith will be important in deciding their votes for president this election year.

-- Gallup Poll, March 2, 2004

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Bush, Kerry Court Religious Voters

According to a June 4, 2004 ABC News poll, nearly two-thirds of American citizens say religious leaders in general should not try to influence politicians' positions on issues. Contrast that with recent news stories about both the Republican and Democratic parties' new campaigns to rally religious voters around the country, and it is clear that the dynamic of religion and politics in the United States continues to be a constant in the U.S. political climate.

The role of religion in politics and specifically in presidential elections is a long one. One instance involved the question of democratic presidential nominee Senator John F. Kennedy's Catholicism. In 1960, Kennedy gave a speech to Protestant ministers in Houston that assured the clergymen — and voters — that his Catholic faith, would have no affect on his political decision making. "I believe in an America where the separation between church and state is absolute," he said.

At that time, the divide between Catholic voters and Protestant voters was clear: 75 percent of Catholics voted for Kennedy and 75 percent of Protestants voted for Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee.

Today, however, "Voters don't seem to care too much about which of the

(continued on page 2)

Religion and the 2004 Presidential Elections: An Interview with Professor Clyde Wilcox

Clyde Wilcox, Professor of Government at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., and author of several books on the relationship between religion and politics including "Public Attitudes toward Church and State" and "Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective," spoke to Washington File Staff Writer Alexandra

Abboud on June 4 about religion and the 2004 presidential election.

Q: The United State is a country that fosters the separation of church and state. What is the relationship between religion and politics in the U.S. today?

(continued on page 3)

Christian groups their leaders might belong to,” said Dr. Clyde Wilcox, professor of government at Georgetown University. “What they really want to see is a president who has some sincere religious faith.”

The contemporary role of religion in politics has evolved from being an issue of the candidate’s religious affiliation to a matter of voters’ religious preferences and what that indicates about their views on specific political issues.

A March 2004 Gallup poll found that 64 percent of registered voters say that their personal religious beliefs and faith will be important in deciding their votes for president this year. With this in mind, both the Republican and Democratic parties have made religious outreach a key component of their campaigns. The Republican National Committee website, for example, features outreach coordinators from groups including Catholics, Protestants (Evangelical and others), Jews and Muslims.

According to a USA Today poll, the demographic of those who attend religious services — a group that the Bush campaign is actively courting — are likely to vote republican on election day. In a phenomenon the poll refers to as the “religion gap,” “the divide isn’t between Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Gentiles” but instead on the one side are those religious voters that attend religious services regularly — and are likely to vote Republican — and other side,

“those who attend religious services only occasionally or never.”

In April, Senator John Kerry, the presumed Democratic nominee, named Mara Vanderslice, an Evangelical Christian, as the religious outreach coordinator to his campaign. Concerning her new task, Vanderslice is quoted in USA Today as saying “the most important thing to start with are opportunities for John Kerry to share more openly with the American electorate about his faith experience, how it’s inspired his commitment in public service and how it’s influenced his life.”

Although both parties are reaching out to religious voters in general, two specific groups — Catholics and Evangelical Protestants — have gotten the most attention from the parties and candidates alike. Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, however, represent two very different voting groups with varying concerns and voting patterns. It is likely that both parties will use different campaign strategies to reach out to these voters.

Kerry will be the first Catholic candidate to secure the Democratic nomination since the late President John F. Kennedy. Although Catholic voters in the past were viewed as a voting bloc, today, many analysts agree that there are simply too many Catholic voters — a little over 20 percent of voters are Catholic — to be considered a unified voting entity. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, only 32 percent of Catholics say

that their religious beliefs occasionally or frequently guide their voting decision. “When all is said and done, Catholics go to the polls as something else: veterans, union members, residents of the Northeast, young, old,” said pollster John Zogby. “Being Catholic is not the major identifier.”

In contrast, the Pew study’s results on Evangelical Protestants found that more than two-thirds of those who define themselves as Evangelical Protestants say that their religious beliefs affect their voting decision.

Evangelicals strongly support several Republican positions — for example, against gay marriage, stem cell research and abortion — and, according to the Pew study, 70 percent are in favor of Bush’s re-election.

The Bush campaign is also reaching out to the up to four million conservative, religious voters who failed to vote in the 2000 presidential election. It has mounted an aggressive voter registration drive aimed at this demographic.

The Kerry campaign may not be able to successfully court Evangelicals because of ideological differences on many key issues. However, Democrats are reaching out to more politically liberal religious voters. On June 9, more than 350 liberals of varying religious faiths gathered at a conference in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a Democratic think tank. Attendees discussed increasing the



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The U.S. Department of State is pleased to present its election coverage newsletter, **Election Focus 2004**. The newsletter will provide non-partisan coverage of the U.S. election process, featuring articles, interviews, public opinion polls, and other information on the presidential primaries, debates, conventions and campaign activities of the major presidential candidates.

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role of mainstream religious voters and organizations — known as the religious left — in U.S. politics and elections. ■

(continued from page 1)

Religion and the 2004 Presidential Elections: An Interview with Professor Clyde Wilcox

Professor Clyde Wilcox: Politicians and the courts continue to debate the meaning of the separation of church and state in the 1st Amendment to the US constitution. The phrase itself is “Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of a religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” So, what does it mean to establish a religion? It doesn’t actually say.

The phrase “separation of church and state” is Thomas Jefferson’s language later on. It means that the government shall not establish a religion in the way that there are established churches in Germany and Norway, for example.

But what it has never meant is that religious people can’t use their religion to help them make political decisions, including policy decisions, including who to vote for. It has never meant that churches cannot comment on policy issues of the day. In my view, it simply means that the government can’t establish a religion or take sides between religions.

Q: In this election year, are presidential candidates looking at religious voters and religious organizations as

an important voting bloc? If so, what are they doing to reach out to these voters?

Wilcox: One of the remarkable things about the United States is that it is a very religious nation, compared to Europe for example. Probably close to half of Americans tell survey researchers that they attend church every week. And although some of them are probably exaggerating, this is a very high number and therefore no presidential candidate could ever win the presidency without appealing to highly-religious voters.

The difficulty is that we are also a nation of many religions. Christians constitute about 80 percent of the public, but there are many Muslims, and Sikhs, and Hindus, and so forth. And moreover, within that 80 percent who are Christians, there are hundreds and hundreds of denominations. So there is no single group that comes anywhere close to being a majority in the U.S. So candidates cannot make a narrow sectarian appeal but rather a broader appeal.

What the surveys show is that Americans want their president — and their leaders in general — to be somewhat religious. Voters don’t seem to care too much about which of the Christian groups their leaders might belong to.

But what voters do want to see is a president who has some sincere religious faith — some kind of grounding in a religion. At the same time, there’s a little bit of a nervousness on the part of voters about voting for someone who might think that he’s having a very close conversation with God, and God is calling him to make a particular policy.

“What the surveys show is that Americans want their president — and their leaders in general — to be somewhat religious.”

— Professor Clyde Wilcox,
Georgetown University

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Government.

Q: What is the role of religious organizations such as churches in an election?

Wlicox: Churches are actually active in campaigns, but there's a limit on what they can do and still remain a tax-exempt charity. They can't endorse a candidate, for example. But they can have voter registration drives, they can encourage their voters to think about the issues, and which issues are important to them. Quite a few churches are very active in politics. But they're not — at least in theory — partisan in their approach.

Q: What safeguards are there to make sure that these tax-exempt organizations — such as churches — aren't involved in political activities that tax-exempt organizations are prohibited from engaging in?

Wlicox: The Internal Revenue Service has developed a set of guidelines to help churches understand what they're allowed to do, and what they're not allowed to do, and those guidelines are widely distributed. If the IRS finds that the church had been engaged sub-

stantially in partisan politics, it might withdraw its tax-exempt status.

In general, we lean over backwards to give freedom of religion, and to give churches the right to criticize policies and to talk about what issues are important in the campaign. But there is a policy that if they become heavily partisan, then they're no longer considered a charity. That's very important in the U.S. because anyone can form a church here. I could form my own church and call it the Church of Clyde, and if I'm a tax-exempt operation, then, by law, I can't really be doing electoral politics from it. ■

Campaign★Highlight

Backgrounder: Separation of Church and State in the U.S.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,” reads the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This clause has been interpreted to mean that the government of the United States — unlike Great Britain and other European countries — may not declare one religion as the national religion of the United States nor support one religion over another. However, this clause is still much debated today, and the Supreme Court of the United States is often asked to clarify the meaning of what is known as the Establishment Clause and the issue of separation of church and state.

It was not until 1802 that the phrase “separation of Church and

State” became synonymous with the Establishment Clause. Thomas Jefferson coined the phrase in a letter written to the Danbury Baptist Association in which Jefferson defended his decision to not proclaim national days of fasting and thanksgiving, as the two presidents before him — Washington and Adams — had done.

The Constitution states that Congress “should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’; thus building a wall of eternal separation between Church & State,” he wrote.

The U.S. Supreme Court and other U.S. courts have been continually

asked to interpret the clause. The benchmark case for all later decisions regarding religious liberty is *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). The Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, ruled that direct government assistance to religious schools was unconstitutional. The majority opinion outlined a test — known as the “Lemon Test” — for deciding when a law violates the Establishment Clause. According to the decision, a law involving religion is constitutional if it has secular (non-religious) purpose, is neutral towards religion (neither for or against it) and does not result in “excessive entanglements” between government and religion.

“A government cannot be premised on the belief that all persons are created equal when it asserts that God prefers some,” said former Justice Harry A. Blackmun in his decision in

the 1992 Supreme Court ruling in the case *Lee v. Weisman*. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that prayers during school graduation violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In the most recent decision regarding the separation of church and state on June 14, the Supreme Court allowed the phrase “one nation, under God” (a phrase that was added to the

pledge in 1954 during the cold war) to remain in the Pledge of Allegiance — a daily ritual for millions of U.S. school children across the country — thereby reversing a district court decision that stated that the phrase “under God” in the pledge constituted “a profession of religious belief” in public schools and therefore violated the Establishment Clause.

The Supreme Court, however, did

not rule on the actual issue of whether or not the pledge violated the establishment clause, but rather ruled that the man who brought the suit on behalf of his daughter did not have “standing,” which is the legal right to bring a case to the court. As a result of the ruling, the Supreme Court left the Constitutional question unresolved, at least for the time being. ■